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ABSTRACT

A needs assessment instrument was developed to identify training competencies for rural special education teachers in Louisiana. The 49-item questionnaire addressed such issues as the curriculum offered by the teacher education program as well as the personal and professional characteristics necessary for success in the rural classroom. The questionnaire was completed by 24 special education administrators and teachers and by 8 special education trainees. At least 50% of both groups rated every item on the questionnaire as either "moderately important" or "very important." The most pressing need identified by both groups was in the area of working with a wide diversity of handicapping conditions. Other areas demonstrating a high degree of consensus among the administrators/teachers were: methods coursework, generic/noncategorical approaches to teaching rural exceptional children, practicum in rural settings, observation opportunities, interpersonal communication skills, ability to cope with low incidence populations, and creativity and decision-making strategies. The trainees demonstrated consensus in the areas of: effective strategies for adapting curriculum, knowledge of current legislation, increased community involvement, and availability of employment. (A table showing survey results is appended.) (JDD)

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Identifying Training Needs for Rural Special Educators

Introduction

Preservice training programs in special education provide specialized programming to meet the needs of exceptional children. Most programs do not differentiate between urban and rural issues in terms of personnel preparation (Helge, 1981). Nevertheless, a growing number of special education programs have become concerned with the education of exceptional children in rural environments as a phenomenon requiring additional specialized instruction. The advent of groups such as the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) and the National Rural Development Institute and concomitant journals and publications evidences the recognition of unique and pressing issues intrinsic to rural special education.

Marrs (1984) stated that teacher preparation programs across the country have not prepared sufficient numbers of qualified personnel for rural special education programs. Because instruction is often insufficient, difficulties with staff recruitment and retention abound. Attrition rates of 30 percent to 50 percent are the norm for rural special educators (Helge, 1983). Most programs simply have not trained special education teachers to cope with life in isolated, remote, and culturally distinct areas (Sontag & Burton, 1980). Ramifications of such ineffective training for rural special educators become even more acute when one considers that two thirds of all schools in the country are located in rural settings (Sher, 1978), and the majority of unserved handicapped children resides in these areas.

It is not surprising that rural preservice training in special education has been deemed a high priority need by professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children CASE Research Division Committee and the National Education Association. In order to prepare a corps of teachers for the unique challenges of rural schools, Helge (1981) recommended that rural preparation programs offer curricula which (a) train personnel to work with a wide variety of handicapping conditions, (b) are data-based and

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field tested, (c) stress the importance of using available university and community resources, (d) incorporate local community value systems, and (e) provide ample opportunities for in-vivo training in the rural classroom. Helge (1981) contended that this type of training program is more likely to produce teachers who understand the differences between rural and urban special education and are aware of the state-of-the-art of rural special education including service delivery and alternate resources. Furthermore, an awareness of local community values will aid teachers in working with peers, parents, citizens, and agencies.

The literature in rural special education indicates a consensus in regard to several needs or issues unique to the rural environment. Perhaps the most dramatic difference between rural and urban special education revolves around the delivery of services. Services for exceptional children in rural areas are less available, more sporadic, and less differentiated (Helge, 1983; Marrs, 1984). Low-incidence disabilities receive particularly inadequate services in many rural systems (Helge, 1984). Due both to lack of funding and lack of qualified support personnel, the special education teacher may be the only service available for students with a wide variety of handicapping conditions.

The perceptions of rural special education personnel themselves confirm the inadequacy of current programs. Helge's (1983) survey of 200 rural special education directors and teachers in all 50 states underscores many basic deficiencies in current teacher training programs. Although almost all the respondents had ostensibly been trained for work with rural handicapped students, 97% of the respondents felt that they were not adequately trained and that most of their rural training took place "on the job." Consequently, 59% deemed experiential training as an essential (but often non-existent) aspect of preservice training. In general, most of the respondents felt that they needed more direct contact with all aspects of the rural educational environment. More than half of the respondents also indicated specific types of coursework necessary for effective teaching in rural special education. Such coursework included (a) service delivery strategies for low-incidence rural populations, (b) generic approaches to teaching rural handicapped children, (c) customs, mores, and cultures of rural areas, and (d) status of rural education service delivery systems.

In general, several themes emerge from Helge's (1983) survey. References to lack of services and the resultant need for general diverse special education skills, the importance of understanding realistically the culture of the specific rural environment, and the overriding importance of experiential training in rural settings predominated the

responses. Hence, the single greatest weakness of training programs seemed to be the lack of realistic experiences in a rural community. Clearly, a successful training program must immerse itself directly within the communities it intends to serve.

The state of Louisiana is largely rural. Undoubtedly, many preservice programs are replete with the shortcomings identified by Helge's (1983) study. In addition, Louisiana has particular problems which are currently exacerbating the difficulty in training personnel for the handicapped population. Because of the decline in the oil industry, the economic situation is a grave one. Louisiana is currently leading the nation in unemployment. According to the United States Department of Labor statistics for June 1987, 11.2 percent of Louisiana's labor force is out of work. Universities and colleges have been forced to raise their tuition to offset financial problems. Additionally, the state's Professional Improvement Plan (PIP) which previously extended tuition waivers to teachers was completely cut in the Fall of 1985. Consequently, many teachers who were working on teacher education plans have been forced to discontinue their training because of financial problems. As Louisiana has an oil dependent economy and the forecast for the industry is pessimistic, it is assumed that teacher training efforts will continue to be adversely affected for some time to come.

Approximately 64 percent of Louisiana's residents live outside of urbanized areas of the state and almost half of these residents live in communities with a population less than 2,500. These rural areas are somewhat unique in several characteristics. Firstly, numerous ethnicities are represented by inhabitants; Yugoslavs, Hungarians, Creoles, Cajuns, Blacks, Vietnamese, and various other cultures are included in integrated and segregated rural communities. Louisiana is recognized to be a "melting pot" because the backgrounds of its residents are so diverse. However, in actuality most of these ethnic groups have not "melted" into the mainstream but rather have retained lifestyles consistent with their ethnic group. Secondly, the watery geography of Louisiana including the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico, and a multitude of bayous has had considerable influence on living patterns of the state's inhabitants. These expanses of water have created numerous remote areas in which rural communities are separated from neighboring rural communities and families are distant to neighbors. In certain remote areas of the state, school boats are still used to bring children from the bayous to their schools. These bodies of water have also supported occupations which are dissimilar to the mainstream culture. Hunting, trapping, crabbing, and shrimping are examples of these economic

endeavors. As these are seasonal occupations, they significantly affect school attendance because it is typical for all family members to participate in the work. And thirdly, religion is a very important characteristic of almost all communities in Louisiana. Its considerable significance is exemplified by the fact that public funds are used to provide services for parochial schools, e.g., transportation and special education. The separation of church and state in Louisiana has not been established with the clarity demonstrated in the rest of the country.

Method

The purpose of this study was to implement a needs assessment procedure to identify training competencies for rural special education teachers in Louisiana. A needs assessment tool modeled after Helge's (1983) was developed by Southeastern Louisiana University's Project Rural Return, a federally funded project designed to recruit and retain special educators for rural areas by providing them with a rural special education curriculum. The needs assessment questionnaire addressed crucial issues focusing on the curriculum offered by the program as well as the personal and professional characteristics necessary for success in the rural classroom. This questionnaire was completed by the 24 members of the Rural Special Education Advisory Council which is comprised of special education administrators and teachers. Therefore, the needs assessment addressed rural special education training competencies from both an administrator's and teacher's perspective. The Trainee Task Force, comprised of eight Project Rural Return trainees, offered perceptions from a student's perspective.

The questionnaire contained Likert-scale responses. Data were tabulated to indicated the percentage of responses to each point on the Likert scale for every question. Because the results were tabulated separately for the Advisory Council and the Trainee Task Force, direct comparisons of teachers' versus students' perceptions can be made. Additionally, comparing the results of the present study to Helge's (1983) survey will provide an increased understanding of needs unique to Louisiana rural culture as well as needs shared by Louisiana with rural communities at large.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the study in the questionnaire format for both the Advisory Council and the Trainee Task Force. A visual inspection revealed that at least 50 percent of both groups rated every item as either "moderately important" or "very important". Furthermore, for

more than half the items, there were no responses indicating "not important". Since general agreement existed that all items had at least some importance, further analysis focused on determining which items were consistently rated as "very important" by a significant majority of respondents in each group. Consequently, items that indicated at least 70 percent consensus as "very important" were considered for discussion.

The Advisory Council demonstrated a high degree of consensus (i.e., at least 70%) on items 5, 6, 11, 12, 19, 22, 42, and 43. The Trainee Task Force demonstrated a high degree of consensus on items 7, 37, 43, 47, and 48. The implications of these results are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

Item 43, "working with a wide diversity of handicapping conditions" emerged as the one area which both groups identified as "very important". In terms of the analysis of the questionnaire, it may be concluded that working with a wide variety of handicapping conditions is the most pressing need as perceived by diverse professionals and para-professionals in rural special education. This conclusion reiterates Helge's (1981) recommendation that personnel need to be trained in a wide variety of handicapping conditions, largely because the rural special education teacher is the often the only service available within the community. Consequently, the special education teacher in a rural area frequently must deal with children with low-incidence handicaps, regardless of the teacher's area of certification or expertise. This response from the present study also parallels the findings from Helge's (1983) survey that rural special educators desired more generic teaching approaches as well as training for low-incidence populations.

The Advisory Council indicated several other areas of need. "Methods coursework" (#5) and "generic/noncategorical approaches to teaching rural exceptional children" (#6) reemphasize the need for training in a variety of exceptionalities. Items 11 and 12, "practicum in rural settings" and "observation opportunities" respectively, recall Helge's (1983) finding that rural special educators were in need of experiential training. The Advisory Council emphasized the need for "interpersonal communication skills" (#19). Because administrators are often more formally trained in consultation, they may value such skills highly. Item 22, "ability to cope with low incidence populations", is consistent with the necessity of dealing with a wide variety of handicaps. Finally, the Advisory Council agreed on the importance of "creativity and decision making strategies".

This rating may reflect a logical and necessary response by professionals currently in the field to many of the limitations imposed by rural settings, a problem which is exacerbated in Louisiana due to the current economic depression.

The Trainee Task Force differed in its consensus of the most important needs. These may result in part from specific ramifications of working in rural Louisiana. Item 7, "effective strategies for adapting curriculum", certainly reflects the concern of future special education teachers who are aware that a wide range of curricula is often unavailable, especially in limited fund states such as Louisiana. "Knowledge of current legislation" (#37) may be especially important in Louisiana where the pupil appraisal handbook, Bulletin 1508, contains eligibility criteria often unique to the state. The selection of "increased community involvement" (#47) implicitly recognizes the cultural wealth and diversity of the state. Finally, item 48, "availability of employment", seems an extremely appropriate concern for future special education teachers in a state with exceedingly high unemployment.

Programs that focus on rural special education need to reflect an awareness of the distinct educational environments and the unique strengths and weaknesses inherent to rural education. Competencies needed for successful rural teaching may be quite distinct from competencies needed for the urban environment. Effective preservice programs must identify and teach specific skills to deal with rural special education delivery of services and administration and prepare the teacher to cope with the effects of cultural pluralism. Such programs are more likely to produce competent teachers who will remain in the rural special education system.

Table 1

Needs Assessment Results for Advisory Council and Trainee Task Force by Percent of Response

Code: 4 = Very Important, 3 = Moderately Important, 2 = Occasionally Important, 1 = Not Important

	Advisory Council				Trainee Task Force			
I. Quality of Preservice Training	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1
1. Communication disorders in culturally diverse populations	33.3	29.2	29.2	8.3	50	25	25	0
2. Rural special education service delivery	29.2	54.2	8.3	4.1	62.5	37.5	0	0
3. Strategies for identifying services and scarce resources	54.2	33.3	16.7	0	62.5	37.5	0	0
4. Rural special education administration	45.8	20.8	20.8	12.5	37.5	50	12.5	0
5. Methods coursework	70.8	20.8	4.1	0	50	37.5	12.5	0
6. Generic/noncategorical approaches to teaching rural exceptional children	75	33.3	4.1	0	62.5	25	12.5	0
7. Effective strategies for adapting curriculum	66.7	29.2	4.1	0	87.5	12.5	0	0
8. Customs, mores, and cultures of rural areas	29.2	41.7	25	4.1	62.5	25	12.5	0
9. Testing and appraisal	45.8	41.7	12.5	0	62.5	37.5	0	0
10. Categorical coursework	58.3	29.2	12.5	0	43	57	0	0
11. Practicum in rural settings	70.8	25.0	4.1	0	37.5	37.5	25	0
12. Observation opportunities	70.8	29.2	0	0	50	37.5	12.5	0
13. Simulations of problem solving	45.8	45.8	8.3	0	50	37.5	12.5	0
14. Team management	45.8	41.7	4.1	0	50	50	0	0
15. General experiences in rural community	37.5	45.8	8.3	8.3	62.5	25	12.5	0

	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1
16. Knowledge of transportation services	29.2	25	29.2	4.1	37.5	37.5	25	0
17. Exposure to rural independent living skills	41.7	45.8	12.5	0	37.5	37.5	25	0
18. Experience with rural technology	16.7	54.2	20.8	8.3	12.5	75	12.5	0
19. Interpersonal communication skills	75	20.8	4.1	0	37.5	37.5	25.	0
II. Competencies								
20. Coping with remoteness to services and resources	66.7	20.8	12.5	0	62.5	25	12.5	0
21. Strategies for locating resources	50	37.5	4.1	4.1	62.5	37.5	0	0
22. Ability to cope with low incidence populations	70.8	29.2	0	0	50	25	25	0
23. Pluralistic cultural awareness	16.7	62.5	12.5	8.3	50	37.5	12.5	0
24. Professional consulting skills	29.2	62.5	8.3	0	37.5	50	12.5	0
25. Working with peers	50	37.5	12.5	0	62.5	25.	12.5	0
26. Working with families	66.7	16.7	8.3	8.3	50	37.5	12.5	0
27. Working with community members	58.3	29.2	12.5	0	62.5	37.5	0	0
28. Working with itinerant service delivery personnel	58.3	33.3	8.3	0	50	50	0	0
29. Coping with remoteness to personal life	45.8	25	16.7	12.5	37.5	50	12.5	0
30. Knowledge or familiarity with type of rural community	20.8	62.5	16.7	0	37.5	50	12.5	0
31. Dealing with transient populations	45.8	33.3	12.5	8.3	50	25	25	0
32. Strategies for recruitment and retention	37.5	33.3	8.3	8.3	50	37.5	12.5	0
33. Interpersonal skills	37.5	62.5	0	0	37.5	37.5	25	0

	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1
34. Understanding the context of a rural school and its environment	45.8	37.5	12.5	8.3	62.5	17.5	25	0
35. Understanding differences in rural and urban special education	20.8	54.2	20.8	4.1	62.5	25	12.5	0
36. Knowledge of effective service delivery models	50	45.8	0	0	50	37.5	12.5	0
37. Knowledge of current legislation (i.e. PL 94-142, LA 1508)	45.8	41.7	12.5	0	75	12.5	12.5	0
38. Diagnosing and treating communication in culturally diverse students	33.3	45.8	20.8	0	14	72	14	0
39. Nondiscriminatory assessments	41.7	37.5	20.8	0	62.5	25	12.5	0
40. Respect of minority cultures	45.8	37.5	12.5	0	62.5	12.5	25	0
41. Simplifying forms for parents from different cultures	66.7	16.7	16.7	0	50	12.5	32.5	0
42. Creativity and decision-making strategies	83.4	8.3	8.3	0	50	50	0	0
43. Working with wide diversity of handicapping conditions	95.8	4.1	0	0	75	75	0	0
III. Other factors for success in the rural environment.								
44. Personal attractions of rural environment (recreational opportunities, slower pace, etc.)	50	16.7	25	8.3	50	32	12.5	0
45. Increased contact with students	45.8	37.5	16.7	0	62.5	12.5	25	0
46. Increased contact with parents	50	33.3	12.5	0	62.5	12.5	25	0
47. Increased community involvement	41.7	41.7	16.7	0	75	12.5	12.5	0
48. Availability of employment	58.3	20.8	20.8	0	75	12.5	12.5	0
49. Being raised in the same community	25	37.5	20.8	16.7	25	37.5	25	12.5

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